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ABSTRACT

Audience adaptation is a concept that is heavily stressed in the basic public speaking course. One way to introduce students to a new audience is by using feature film clips as hypothetical examples. Clips heighten student interest without sacrificing academic rigor while allowing observation and evaluation of communication processes in action. One such film is Ron Howard's comedy "Gung Ho," starring Michael Keaton as an American auto plant executive who must adapt to a contingent of Japanese executives sent to oversee the plant after a buyout. The film pokes fun at both stereotypical American and Japanese communicative behavior, so students are able to address sensitive issues in a comfortable environment. After reviewing audience adaptation concepts with the class, a handout is circulated with instructions for students to pretend they are communication consultants and to evaluate the American executive's public speaking performance, rating his skill as a speaker, as well as his skill in audience adaptation. Using a worksheet, each student must make a recommendation for training representatives for cross-cultural meetings. Students use the knowledge gained from this activity to help prepare for class speech assignments. (A sample worksheet on the film is appended.) (CR)

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ED 397 460

"Gung Ho" about speech: The use of film to address stereotyping in the public speaking classroom

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BACKGROUND

Audience adaptation is a concept that is heavily stressed in the basic public speaking course. In my experience I've found, however, that my students make up a fairly homogenous audience for our speaking assignments. Therefore, although the concept of adaptation is highlighted, my students are always adapting to one particular type of audience.

One way to introduce students to a new audience is by using hypothetical examples. I've found that film clips can help bring a hypothetical example to life more readily than just a case study on a handout. The use of film provides an important substitute for experiences that students cannot readily have (Ruhly, 1974).

According to Proctor (1990), feature films are a useful tool for communication instruction for several reasons:

- they heighten student interest without sacrificing academic rigor
- they utilize a resource with which students are comfortable
- they allow observation and evaluation of communication processes in action
- they expose students to worlds beyond their own
- they provide affective as well as cognitive experiences
- they offer opportunities for discussion, values clarification, and personal assessment. (p. 4)

One film I've had particular success with is the Ron Howard film "Gung Ho". This popular feature film stars Michael Keaton as Hunt Stevenson. Hunt is an American auto plant executive who must learn to adapt to a contingent of Japanese executives who have been sent to oversee the plant after a buyout.

Since the film is a comedy, there are many instances of mishaps and

misunderstandings that occur due to poor intercultural communication skills on the part of the Americans and the Japanese. Using a film like this, according to Ruhly, can increase intercultural understanding because the "image" is a language which can unite people. Despite the fact that the film is rather "corny" and paints stereotypes with the broadest brush strokes, I've found students are not offended by the depictions of characters. The film good-naturedly pokes fun at both stereotypical American and Japanese communicative behavior, so students are able to address sensitive issues in a comfortable environment.

Although there are many fine examples of films that portray Americans having to figure out how to best communicate competently with people of other cultures, I've found it most effective to stick with "mainstream" films that appeal to the widest audience. As Proctor and Adler (1991) explain:

> With rare exception, works in foreign language and those that might be considered "art" films are not well-received by most undergraduates. (p. 395)

THE ACTIVITY

I begin the activity by reviewing audience adaptation concepts with the class. I then give them a handout (see appendix). I read through the instructions on the handout while they read along and take notes. The handout informs them that they are to act as communication consultants and they will be watching a case study from an American/Japanese joint business venture. Their task is to watch the clip and evaluate the American executive's public speaking performance. They are to rate his skill as a speaker, as well as his skill in audience adaptation. They are told that following the clip, they will be asked to offer advice to the executive's firm in order to avoid future business blunders.

I then show the clip. Since this is an in-class activity, I find a short clip most helpful. The particular clip I show occurs within the first 10 minutes of the film, so there is very little need to get students up to speed on plot elements. Because the clip is only about four minutes long, it also makes it easy to replay the scene if students require additional cues. We can also review the clip toward the end of the activity to see how well the "consultants'" advice would work in the actual situation. I find it important not to go overboard with lengthy video examples since the use of commercial film and television clips are often criticized as taking up valuable class time for lecture, speeches, etc. (Caputo and Smith, 1991).

The particular clip I use is helpful because it depicts an American in a public speaking situation. Hunt Stevenson must travel to Japan to give a speech that will hopefully convince the executive board of Assan Motors to purchase the Hadleyville auto plant Hunt represents. The clip would not be very beneficial if the presentation went smoothly. We see Hunt commit many communication errors. He arrives late to the presentation, makes poor small talk, uses inappropriate humor, and seems to have no concept of how Japanese businesspersons communicate.

After watching the clip, students are again reminded that they should pretend they are communication consultants. What advice would the "consultants" offer the Hadleyville plant in terms of preparation of executives for this type of presentation? Using the worksheet, each "consultant" must put together a recommendation of how they would help train representatives for a cross-cultural meeting. Students will be addressing issues such as: 1) researching their audience, 2) how to work within unfamiliar cultures, 3) how to "read" an audience during a presentation. Students can work alone or in small groups. The worksheet could also be used as a homework assignment if class time is restricted.

Once students have had time to work through the handout, I then facilitate a class discussion focused on their answers. What could Hunt Stevenson have done before his presentation to ensure its success? What cues should he have picked up on? What did Hunt do well?

The activity could just end following this discussion, however I think it is important for students to understand how the advice they have given Hunt applies to themselves as well. How can they use their own recommendations when preparing for our speech assignments? Is it also necessary to "research" our audience in advance? What kinds of cues should they be looking for while they are speaking?

I've had much success with using the "Gung Ho" clip, partly due to the fact that students genuinely enjoy the film. I've also found the exercise opens students' eyes to the use of audience adaptation both within and outside of our classroom. Because the clip focuses on a persuasive presentation I find it best to use the activity later in the semester, when students are more familiar with course terminology and concepts of persuasion and audience analysis.

Examples from film can provide students with a valuable learning experience. They are able to better understand the complicated skills involved in intercultural communication. Not only does this better equip them for similar circumstances, it also helps build their communicative competency within their own culture.

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APPENDIX

SPEECH COMMUNICATION 101-HAYWARD

"Gung Ho" Worksheet

Due to your background knowledge in public speaking, you have been hired as a communication consultant for a Hadleyville auto plant. You will be responsible for training American plant executives for their business trips to Japan. The plant has secured a case study which highlights a presentation Hunt Stevenson, one of their executives, made to the board of directors of Assan Motors in Japan. You are to analyze this case and report to Hadleyville. They hope, with your expertise, to avoid the initial pitfalls that occurred at Assan Motors. The following questions should assist you in your analysis and recommendation:

1. What type of research should Hunt Stevenson have done <u>in advance</u> of his trip to Japan?

2. Did Hunt pick up on audience "cues" during his presentation? Which cues did he miss?

3. Was Hunt's presentation appropriate for the Japanese audience? What did you find to be inappropriate and why?

4. Are American standards of public speaking similar to Japanese standards?

5. What did Hunt do well in terms of his presentational style?

6. Would Hunt's presentation have been appropriate for an American audience?

7. How would you train Hadleyville employees to avoid a repeat of this awkward presentation?